CHAPTER LI: A PHANTASMAL STENCH

I AM MUCH OBLIGED THAT YOU KEPT TO THE DESIGNATED ARRIVAL TIME.

WELCOME NOW!

WE FOLLOW OUR CONTRACTS TO THE UTMOST.

WE TRADE IN "FLAWLESS WORK" AFTER ALL.

I WOULD FIRST HAVE YOU GRANT PERMISSION FOR THE WEAPONRY WE ARE TO BRING IN.

WE MUST FOLLOW THE PROPER PROCEDURES!

I'LL HAVE LODGING PREPARED FOR YOU.

I IMAGINE YOU MUST BE TIRED FROM YOUR LONG TRIP.

ALSO YOU NEEDN'T WORRY OVER MATTERS SUCH AS ALCHOHOL OR FOOD...

WITH ALL DUE RESPECT, IT WOULD BE PREFERABLE TO CARRY OUT THE WEAPON INSPECTION NOW, WOULD IT NOT?

WE HAVE BROUGHT OUR OWN SUCH GOODS.

YOUR UNDERSTAND-ING IS MUCH OBLIGED.

IF YOU DO NEED ANYTHING ELSE, YOU HAVE BUT TO ASK.

H... H... HAVE YOU NOW... ALRIGHT!

LET US DEAL WITH THE FORMALITIES THEN!

WHY THE HELL WOULD HE CALL IN A DANGEROUS BUNCH LIKE THEM?!

THIS AIN'T NO JOKE, THAT BLOODY JIMENEZ...

THEY'RE A WANDERING GLADIATORIAL GROUP.

THAT'S CERBERUS*...

WHO ARE THEY...?

* A MYTHICAL GREEK BEAST. IT WAS A DOG WITH THREE HEADS WHICH GUARDED THE ENTRANCE TO HADES.

ASIDE FROM BEING INCREDIBLY SKILLED, THEY'RE ALL FREEMEN, SO THEY CAN CHARGE EXORBITANT FEES.

THEY'RE A GROUP OF FORMER SOLDIERS WHO WERE LEFT OUT OF WORK HAVING EXPOSED SOME SORT OF INTERNAL MATTER.

WHAT'S WITH THAT CREEPY LOT...

ARE THEY A GROUP OF ARMED FIGHTERS...?

IF SO, ARE THEY GONNA BE TAKING PART IN THE UPCOMING CONTEST?

AMASS A MOUNTAIN OF CORPSES...

AND SPREAD AN OCEAN OF BLOOD.

WITHOUT FAIL THEY ALWAYS...

I'VE NEVER HEARD TALE OF THEIR DEFEAT...

,THEY'LL FIGHT ANYONE, BE THEY CLOSE COMBAT FIGHTERS, MOUNTED, OR ANYTHING ELSE.

THEY TRAVEL ALL OVER, MAKING A FORTUNE AS GODS OF DEATH.

THEY SELL THE MOST BRUTAL SORTS OF SLAUGHTER WHICH AN AUDIENCE COULD ASK FOR.

IF THEY WERE TO SHOW THEIR FACES, THERE'D BE A HORDE OF RESENTFUL PEOPLE OUT TO GET THEM!

ARE YOU AN IDIOT?! THEY'RE IN THE BUSINESS OF MURDER.

WHAT'S WITH THE MASKS?

THEY CREEP ME OUT...!

IN FIGHTS, GLADIATORS WEAR OPPRESSIVE, LIMITING MASKS.

IF THEY FAIL TO GROW USED TO SUCH INCONVENIENT ITEMS IT CAN PROVE FATAL.

IT'S THEIR FIELD OF VISION.

I THINK THEIR MASKS HAVE ANOTHER IMPORTANT USE.

?

NOT QUITE...

THAT'S A REAL CHILLING SENSE OF PERFECTIONISM, AIN'T IT!

SO, THEY DRESS LIKE THAT TO HELP ACCUSTOMISE THEIR EYESIGHT AND BREATHING.

THAT MAY WELL BE TRUE, EH BOSS!

AND LOOKING AT THINGS...

RUMOUR HAS IT THEY DON'T TAKE 'EM OFF EVEN WHEN THEY'RE WITH A WOMAN!

YOU'LL JUST HIT THE DRINKS AGAIN SOON ANYWAY...

HEH.

...

I'M COMPLETELY SOBER NOW.

I DON'T EVEN WANNA THINK ABOUT IT!

"PAX ROMANA" BROUGH ABOUT A LANGUID BOREDOM IN THE PEOPLE, AND THEY FOUND THEMSELVES DESIRING EVER MORE EXTREME SHOWS TO AMUSE THEMSELVES WITH.

DURING THE LATTER HALF OF THE CENTURY, THE EMPIRE EXPERIENCED A STABLE PERIOD.

BUT IT WAS NOT JUST ARMED SLAVES PRESENT...

INDEED, SUCH GLADIATORIAL FIGHTS WERE BECOMING HUGE DRAWS, AND REELING IN COPIOUS AMOUNTS OF MONEY.

RECKLESS, PROFESSIONAL GLADIATORS WOULD ALSO EMERGE.

SURE THING. IT AIN'T NO BUSINESS OF SMALL TIME PLAYERS LIKE US IS IT?

JUST ACT AS THOUGH YOU WERE BLIND AND MUTE.

LISTEN UP. I DON'T WANT YOU POKING YOUR HEAD'S INTO THEIR BUSINESS!

THEY MIGHT BE A PART OF THE FIGHTING WORLD, BUT YOU DON'T WANNA GET INVOLVED WITH THEM. THEY'RE A DEADLY LOT.

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A BITTER WIND BLEW THROUGH THE NORMALLY CHEERFUL PORT TOWN.

WHAT WAS THEIR REASON FOR ARRIVING VIA THE VEIL OF DARKNESS?

HE QUAKED FROM THE BLOODY, PHANTASMAL STENCH OF DEATH WHICH THEY BORE.

CESTVS FELT FEAR AND UNEASE AT THE SIGHT OF THOSE UNKNOWN FIGURES, AND A SHIVER RAN DOWN HIS SPINE.

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YOU THREE WILL STICK TO WHAT YOU'VE DONE TILL NOW.

CESTVS IS DUE TO FIGHT SOON, SO I'LL BE FOCUSING MY ATTENTION ON HIS TRAINING FROM TODAY ONWARDS.

DON'T RELAX YOU FOOLS!

WE AIN'T BEING SENT OUT! HAAAAH! THAT'S GREAT!

YOU'VE NUMEROUS THINGS TO COVER!

PUT OUR YOUR RIGHT HAND.

WHAT'RE WE STARTING WITH MASTER?

FINALLY, I'M GETTING SOME TRAINING.

...?

UNTIL THE DAY OF YOUR FIGHT, YOU'LL ONLY BE PUNCHING WITH ONE HAND.

WE'LL SWAP BETWEEN YOUR RIGHT AND LEFT HALFWAY THROUGH THE DAY.

OKAY, BEGIN!

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KEEP AT IT! WE NEED YOUR PUNCHING NOW TO BE AS EFFECTIVE AS YOUR RIGHT HAND!

KEEP YOUR RIGHT FIST BY YOUR CHIN FOR PROTECTION.

HAVE YOUR ELBOW BY YOUR ARMPIT TO PROTECT THAT.

THIS IS DULL, BUT SIMPLE!

WHAT'S THE REASON FOR THIS RATHER AWKWARD PRACTICE?!

MOVE TO THE OPTIMAL POSITION, YOU NEED TO COMPENSATE FOR YOUR RIGHT ARM!

WORK FOR YOUR RANGE WITH YOUR FEET!

EXACTLY, YOUR BALANCE IS POOR!

MY CORE'S THROWN OFF WHEN I CAN'T PUNCH WITH BOTH FISTS, MY BODY GETS CARRIED AWAY!

HEY.

NO CESTVS TODAY?

HE'S GONNA BE IN THE UPCOMING MATCH...

SO HE'S HAVING SOME SPECIAL TRAINING...

THAT SCRAWNY KID'S GONNA BE IN A FIGHT?!

THERE'S A SHOCK...!

I WAS SURE...

HE WAS STILL JUST A TRAINEE...

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE MASTER, YOU CAN'T PUNCH AS YOU WOULD WITH BOTH FISTS...

LIKE THIS...

AND BESIDES... YOU FIGHT WITH BOTH FISTS IN BOXING, DON'T YOU...

MY LECTURES ARE ALWAYS IMPORTANT.

NOW, STAND UP, "SIR".

WE'LL BIND YOUR LEFT HAND NEXT.

SO LET'S WORK ON SMOOTHING YOUR MOTION OUT.

YOU'RE OVEREXERTING YOURSELF!

YOU'RE NOT MOVING CLEANLY!

IT'S OBVIOUS YOU'D HAVE STRONG BLOWS WITH YOUR DOMINANT HAND...

GUARGH!

MOVE THE MOMENT YOU'RE HIT!

TO THINK YOU'RE STILL ONLY AT THIS LEVEL...

YOU KNOW I'VE GOT A FIST BOUND UP RIGHT?!

IT WOULD BE FLATTERY TO CALL YOUR ATTACK AND DEFENCE CHILDISH.

GET UP, CESTVS.

HOW LONG ARE YOU GOING TO SIT THERE FOR?

I'VE ALREADY SPENT ENOUGH OF MY TIME HELPING YOU.

ISN'T IT CLEAR THAT THIS WOULD HAPPEN IF YOUR FIGHTING STRENGTH IS HALVED?!

IS THIS PRACTICE REALLY NEEDED?!

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YOU MAY TRAIN DAILY, YET VICTORY COMES IN A MOMENT.

YET IT IS FOR THAT MOMENT ALONE...

FOR THE SAKE OF GAINING A STRONG BLADE WITH WHICH TO CONQUER THAT ONE MATCH, THAT WE ALL TORMENT OURSELVES FOR.

THAT IS WHY YOU PRACTICE CESTUS...

IT IS HOW YOU WORK ON REVEALING YOUR OWN WEAKNESSES

ONLY THOSE WHO HAVE CONTINUED TO POLISH THEIR BLADES, BY REFLECTING UPON AND CONQUERING THEIR WEAKNESSES, CAN SURVIVE THESE FIGHTS.

I KNOW YOU'RE BUSY WITH THE OTHERS MASTER...

SO HURRY UP AND GO.

YOU CAN SPARE ME THE SERMON.

I WANT TO FOCUS.

AS PENANCE, BOTH YOUR HEART AND BODY WILL ACHE.

IT IS NOT SOMETHING WHICH CAN BE AVOIDED THOUGH, IF YOU DESIRE TRUE GROWTH.

GET IT TOGETHER.

IT IS MY DUTY TO ASCERTAIN THE FIGHT'S OUTCOME MYSELF.

I'LL COME THROUGH WITH MY ALL, AND FIGHT.

I'LL DO IT. NO MATTER WHEN...

I'M SURE YOU CAN HAVE THE BEST FIGHT OF THE DAY.

I'M COUNTING ON YOU.

HEEEY... IN A GOOD MOOD MISS?

HE'S DRUNK AGAIN.

...

IT'S FINE SO LONG AS I WIN.

YOU DON'T NEED TO TELL ME.

I'LL JUST DO WHAT I NEED TO.

...

THIS BUSINESS AIN'T A HOBBY OF MINE.

YOU MIGHT'VE GOT BACK TO BACK WINS IN CAPUA...

BUT DON'T GET AHEAD OF YOURSELF KID.

YOU REALLY RECKON YOU CAN WORK WITH AN APATHETIC ATTITUDE LIKE "I'LL JUST DO WHAT I NEED TO"?

DON'T FORGET YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES. THE MOMENT YOU LOSE, YOU'RE IN THE RED.

I'M IN THE BUSINESS OF PROFIT.

DON'T WANT THAT? DON'T GO IN THE RED...

IF YOU SCREW UP, THEN SELLING YOUR MASTER AND YOUR MATES AIN'T GONNA COVER THINGS.

I'LL SPELL IT OUT FOR YOU...

...

IF YOU UNDERSTAND THE POSITION YOU'RE IN, THEN FIRE YOURSELF UP AND GET READY.

AND HE'LL BE DONE IN A FLASH.

IT'S RADDOCK'S MATCH FIRST...